

An excerpt from a letter to Paul H. Kusuda
written by Mr. O. D. Richardson, Head of the Department
of English at the Los Angeles City College.

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"The future of any one of the Nisei is, today, the future of the Nisei as a group. That future is by no means clear. At the worst, their fears may be realised, and they might become an unwanted segregated, or even deported class --a group banished from America; and probably just as much unwelcome in Japan. The likelihood of some such unhappy ending of the American adventure is increased by the fact that the Nisei were very poorly prepared for their most fateful hour. They had not, in their minds, made a clear-cut choice between the institutions of Japan and America. They had not studied them, and were not very sure what they were. They had not followed the events which, step by step, led to war. They had told themselves that they had adapted their lives, the America of "freedom" (which meant living well at the expense of subject races and depressed economic groups; and again meant that you should never be condemned for what you did because nobody was sure what was right); the America of "progress" (which meant that every generation shall do less work and get more for it than the preceding one, whether they earn it or not); the America of "tolerance" (which meant that I will not mention your graft if you don't mention mine); of "happiness" (which meant dance halls, and necking parties and gin jags and late hours and divorce)-- this was not America at all. If you remember, we talked this over after war was declared, and I urged the point of view that the totalitarian powers would never understand the strength of this country, because they would judge us by themselves. If their people acted as foolishly as ours do, they would be right in believing that the country was to be had for the plucking. But those who know us know that you must never judge an American by what he does in times of peace and prosperity. You never see him as he is unless you see him when he is in danger and difficulty. When that time comes he becomes another person, with a devotion and ability to endure hardship and to take joy in sacrifice which so far has brought him through every crisis. I think the Japanese and Germans have misjudged ~~us~~ us. I think the Issei have misjudged us. I think the Nisei have misjudged us. But it adds to the complication of their present plight that all they know about us they learned in those times when we were least like ourselves. And now they have been segregated, and I do not believe they are following the tremendous changes taking place in the country as it finds itself again. Yet if they do not follow those changes, it is going to be difficult for them to take advantage of what opportunities are open to them now; and doubly difficult when this phase of the war is over and they are able to try to re-establish themselves again.

These are the least cheerful elements in the present position of the Nisei. Now let us look at the more promising ones. First, this war is forcing America to accept other races as equal to the Caucasian. Most Americans I am convinced are quite willing to do so, and have only lacked any means of doing it practically without ruining their business or something of the kind. And those who don't want to must, because (1) we are forced into racial tolerance by the racial superiority adopted by the Nazis. If the Hindus and Chinese believe that they have nothing to gain from an Allied victory except continued slavery, then they have no reason to help the Allied Nations win--and with a hostile China and India we cannot win the war. Wilkie has made that very clear. (2) We are no longer able to treat racial minorities just as it pleases us. We do not ask the Mexican government or the Chinese government how we should treat persons of Mexican or Chinese blood. But if we treat them in such a way as to offend those governments, they are now in a position to deliver a very effective protest, and if necessary we will have to curb elements in our own population offensive to the government of our allies.

Second, the "case Nisei" has now become a test case in the further operation of democracy. To further deprive these people, or deny them access to the courts, or to condemn them in the absence of proven guilt is to strike at the Constitution and set up a precedent so dangerous and far-reaching that numbers of the most influential people are now taking an interest in it. What these persons lack in numbers they make up for in name and influence in the communities of this country. The issue has brought them together, made it possible for them to know one another, clarified their opinions, and this group of prominent men and women are going to have a very important part in the future of the Nisei.

The exemplary conduct of the American Japanese has done much to aid their friends. They have handled a delicate matter with the most praiseworthy restraint and good sense. They must now go one step further. No one can guarantee the future today. But they, and especially the Nisei, must have the courage to believe that they have a future in this country; that we will, eventually be fair toward them; that the war will clarify the race issue and in the end they will be better off than before. It may not turn out that way, but I believe it will. And they must prepare and act on this assumption, or they cannot make plans or develop a policy at all, except, maybe on the assumption that America will be defeated. Even should this happen, I fear they would be no better off, because from what we know of Japan today, I fear the Nisei would get scant welcome in a victorious Japan, tainted as they are with Western ideas and habits. Two steps are, in my opinion, immediately and vitally necessary:

1. The American Japanese should take advantage of

every opportunity to leave the Centers, to serve as much as possible with Caucasians, to aid in any capacity no matter how humble our prosecution of the war, to impress the Caucasians with ~~é~~ their good English, their good-will and sincerity, to forget about pay for the ever so much more important end of gaining public good-will, to endure hardship, embarrassment, hardlooks and hard words if need be, to convince their fellow-citizens of their sincerity--always remembering that those of us who know them love them and believe in them as among the finest people and most sincere lovers of our country's traditions.

2. They must organize "information groups" in order to
 - a. Get clearly in mind what caused the war and what we may reasonably expect the outcome to be.
 - b. Follow the news.
 - c. Convey the information or opinions (if they are opinions) in "a" to those who cannot read or have not been used to thinking about these problems.
 - d. Organize a desire to believe in the United States, and to encourage the activities in (1).
 - e. Keep in touch with the boys and girls who have left the Centers, to keep up their spirits, and encourage them to hope.

To this end I have sent a letter to a former Student Nisei in each Center, suggesting the formation of a "Reading Club" and enclosing a list of vitally important books. In my opinion these books must be read, and their contents widely disseminated in each Center as a basis for future decisions.

It may be argued that contact with the Caucasian teachers makes this reading unnecessary. I am sure that the teachers will do all they can, but for two reasons what they do will not be enough. First, most of them will not be authorities on international and racial relations, and at this time the Nisei must draw their judgments only from the most brilliant scholars and best informed writers of our time. And, second, only Nisei leadership, determination, intelligence, and good sense can bring the Nisei through ~~this~~ this crisis. They must make a habit of forming their own policies and setting their own plans."

SIGNED: O.D. Richardson

A CRISIS FOR THE NISEI

Dear Friends:

If the facts summarized below are true, something should be done quickly. What can we do?

1. The United States is going through a profound revolution. It will never again in our lifetime be the slack, weak, confused and cynical nation which the Nisei left last spring.
2. The Nisei do not seem to know that his revolution is taking place.
3. The Nisei have no part in this revolution.
4. If the Nisei do not find a part in it, but become relaxed and isolated in the Centers, they may find themselves in time the forgotten people--lost in America and unwelcome in Japan.
5. The Nisei can find a part in it by:
 - (1) Informing themselves. Read and discuss! Resolve never to be left intellectual behind. Live in this new world. Keep alert with the best books, and best magazines written by the best contemporary minds. Mediocrity will not do now!
 - (2) Get jobs outside the Center; aid in the war effort; endure hardship and discourtesy if need be, but join in our efforts. The most important thing is to be a part of what is going on. The worst is to be left out. People will not believe what you say, but they will believe what you do.
6. The crisis is here. This program must be undertaken at once. The changes in this country are coming so fast that already the Nisei are being left far behind.
7. Leaders must appear at once: Men and women are needed who understand the real issues, and who have confidence that, in the end, the Caucasians will be fair.
8. The Nisei have many friends among the Caucasians who love and respect them. We believe that if the Nisei ~~will~~ will make the supreme effort now, they will be accepted after the war as citizens without discrimination. But we can only help you.
9. Only the Nisei can save the Nisei! Consider the tragic history of the Eta.